



## Gettysburg National Military Park

United States Department of the Interior · National Park Service

### THE CIVIL WAR SOLDIER

#### *What was life as a soldier like in 1863?*



(Hardtack and Coffee)

The life of a soldier in the 1860's was a arduous one and for the thousands of young Americans who left home to fight for their cause, it was an experience none of them would ever forget. Military service meant many months away from home and loved ones, long hours of drill, often inadequate food or shelter, disease, and many days spent marching on hot, dusty roads or in a driving rainstorm burdened with everything a man needed to be a soldier as well as baggage enough to make his life as comfortable as possible. There were long stretches of boredom in camp interspersed with moments of sheer terror experienced on the battlefield. For these civilians turned soldiers, it was very difficult at first getting used to the rigors and demands of army life. Most had been farmers all of their lives and were indifferent to the need to obey orders. Discipline was first and foremost a difficult concept to understand, especially in the beginning when the officer one had to salute may have been the hometown postmaster only a few weeks before. Uniforms issued in both armies were not quite as fancy as those worn by the hometown militias and soldiering did not always mean fighting. There were fatigue duties such as assignments to gather wood for cook fires. Metal fittings had to be polished, horses groomed and watered, fields had to be cleared for parades and drill, and there were water details for the cook house. Guard duty meant long hours pacing up and down a well-trod line, day or night, rain or shine, always on watch for a foe who might be lurking anywhere in the hostile countryside. A furlough was hard to come by as every man was needed in the field and few men had a chance to ever visit home.

A soldier's home in camp was a rectangular piece of canvas buttoned to another to form a small two-man tent or *dog tent* as the soldiers called them. First introduced in 1862, every Union soldier was issued one for use during active campaign and the men joked that only a dog could crawl under it and stay dry from the rain. The tent could be easily pitched for the evening by tying each end to a rifle stuck in the ground by the bayonet or by stringing it up to fence rails. Confederates did not receive shelter tents though some Confederate units were issued a variation of the tent, which they pitched as a lean-to or shelter. As the war progressed it was very common for a Confederate camp to be filled with captured Union tents as well as captured blankets, canteens, and haversacks. Confederates especially prized the Union rubber blankets, which were not manufactured in the south and were ideal as a ground cloth or overhead shelter.



A "dog" tent.  
(Hardtack and Coffee)

Marching and fighting drill was part of the daily routine for the Civil War soldier. Infantry soldiers drilled as squads and in company formations, each man getting accustomed to orders and formations such as marching in column and in a "company front", how to face properly, dress the line, and interact with his fellow soldiers. After an hour of drill on that level, the company moved onto regimental level drills and parades. The soldier practiced guard mount and other procedures such as the Manual of Arms, which infantrymen learned for the rifle-musket. Veterans of the war often remarked how they could recite the steps of loading and priming for many years after the war, thanks to the continual drill. The drill was important for the infantry for they used tactics that had changed little since the time of the American Revolution or the age of Napoleon: infantry fought in closely knit formations of two ranks (or rows) of soldiers, each man in the rank standing side by side. This formation was first devised when the single-shot, muzzle loading musket became the normal weapon on the battlefield, the close ranks being a necessity because of the limitations of the musket. Yet, by 1861, new technology had made the old fashioned smoothbore musket nearly obsolete with the introduction of the rifle musket. By the time of the Gettysburg Campaign, the rifle musket made

up the majority of infantry weapons in both the Union and Confederate armies though it took much longer for the tactics to change. Even with the advance of the rifle musket, the weapons were still muzzle loaders and officers believed that the old-fashioned drill formations were still useful to insure a massing of continuous firepower that the individual soldier could not sustain. The result of this slow change was a much higher than anticipated rate of casualties on the battlefield.

Cavalrymen drilled with their sabers, both on foot and horseback, while artillerymen drilled with their cannons limbered up to the team of horses and unlimbered, ready to fire. Oddly enough, marksmanship on a rifle range did not take precedence over other drill the soldiers learned for several reasons- the military believed that each man would shoot accurately when told to and the war departments did not wish to waste ammunition fired on random targets.



(Hardtack and Coffee)

For the infantry, drums were used to announce daily activities, from sunrise to sunset. Reveille was sounded to begin the day at 5 AM, followed by an assembly for morning roll call and breakfast call. Sick call was sounded soon after breakfast, followed by assemblies for guard duty, drill, or to begin the march. Drummers were also important on the march to keep soldiers in step during parades and to call them to attention. In battle, drums were sometimes used to signal maneuvers and give signals for the ranks to load and fire their weapons. The artillery and cavalry relied solely on buglers who were as important in their roles as the drummers were to the infantry. When not playing for their respective regiments, musicians were often combined with regimental or brigade bands to play marching tunes or provide field music for parades, inspections, and reviews.

Army camps were like a huge bustling city of white canvas, sometimes obscured by smoke from hundreds of campfires. Camps were considered temporary throughout the year until the winter months when the armies would establish winter quarters.

The soldiers would construct log huts that were large enough to accommodate several men, made of trees taken from any nearby source. The logs were laid out on stones underneath the bottom log, in a rectangle and notched to fit tight at the corners and stones, brick, or mud-covered logs were formed into a small fireplace in one end. Mud filled the gap between the logs and inside of the chimney over the fireplace. A roof made from tents or sawn boards and wooded bunks built inside finished the hut. Soldiers often named their winter huts after well known hotels or restaurants back home such as "Wiltshire Hotel" or "Madigan's Oyster House". The armies quartered in these small huts through the winter months and then it was back to the field and dog tents.



(Battles & Leaders)

The soldier of 1863 wore a wool uniform, a belt set that included a cartridge box, cap box, bayonet and scabbard, a haversack for rations, a canteen, and a blanket roll or knapsack which contained a wool blanket, a shelter half and perhaps a rubber blanket or poncho. Inside was a change of socks, writing paper, stamps and envelopes, ink and pen, razor, toothbrush, comb and other personal items. The amount of baggage each soldier carried differed from man to man. The southern soldier was highly regarded for traveling with a very light load basically because he did not have the extra items available to him that the northern soldier had. Southern uniforms were quite different from the northern uniforms, consisting of a short-waisted jacket and trousers made of "jean" cloth- a blend of wool and cotton threads which was very durable. Dyed by different methods, the uniforms were a variation of greys and browns. Northern soldiers called Confederates "butternuts" because of the tan-grey color of the uniforms. Vests were also worn and were often made of jean material as well. Shirts and undergarments were universally of cotton material and often sent to the soldiers from home. Southern-made shoes were of very poor quality and difficult to obtain. Union uniforms were universally of better quality because of numerous mills throughout the north that could manufacture wool cloth and the steady import of material from Europe. The Union soldier's blouse and trousers were wool and dyed a dark blue until 1862 when the trouser color was

altered to a lighter shade of blue. The floppy-crowned forage cap, made of wool broadcloth with a leather visor, was either loved or loathed, but universally worn by most soldiers in the Army of the Potomac. Each soldier would adorn his cap with brass letters of the regiment and company to which he belonged. Beginning in 1863, *corps* badges were designed for the different army corps and these were universally adopted for the top of the cap. Like their Confederate counterparts, most Union soldiers disdained the itchy wool flannel army shirt for cotton shirts and undergarments sent from home.

*(Hardtack and Coffee)*

Leisure activities were similar in either army and most of it was spent writing letters home. Soldiers were prolific letter writers and wrote at every opportunity. It was the only way for them to communicate with loved ones and inform the home folks of their condition and where they were. Thrifty soldiers sent their pay home to support their families and kept only a small amount to see them through until the next payday. The arrival of mail in camp was a cause for celebration no matter where the soldiers were and there was sincere grumbling when the mail arrived late. The lucky soldiers who received a letter from home often read and re-read them many times. Packages from home contained baked goods, new socks or shirts, underwear, and often soap, towels, combs, and toothbrushes. Union soldiers often spent their free time at the sutler's store, comparable to the modern post exchange, where they could purchase toiletries, canned fruit, pocketknives, and other supplementary items, but usually at exorbitant prices. A private's salary amounted to \$13.00 per month in

1863 and those unfortunates who owed the sutler watched as most of their pay was handed over to the greedy businessman on pay day. Confederates did not have the luxury of sutlers, who disappeared soon after the war began. Instead they depended on the generosity of folks at home or farmers and businessmen near the camps.

Free time was also spent in card games, reading, pitching horseshoes, or team sports such as the fledgling sport of baseball, a game which rapidly gained favor among northern troops. Rule booklets were widely distributed and the game soon became a favorite. Soldiers also played a form of football that appeared more like a huge brawl than the game we know today, and often resulted in broken noses and fractured limbs. Holidays were celebrated in camp with feasts, foot races, horse racing, music, boxing matches, and other contests. But while on active campaign, the soldiers were limited to writing, cleaning uniforms and equipment, and sleeping.



Lt. Custer and friend, 1862.  
*(Miller's Photographic History)*

Despite orders to the contrary, many soldiers kept pets with them including dogs, cats, squirrels, raccoons, and other wildlife. One regiment from Wisconsin even had a pet eagle that was carried on its own perch next to the regimental flags. General Lee was purported to have had a pet chicken that faithfully delivered a fresh egg for the general everyday. By far the most popular pets appears to have been dogs and their presence with a master in camp or on the march was often overlooked by high commanders. Many officers, including General George Armstrong Custer who kept a number of dogs around his headquarters, favored the hardiness of these loyal companions and their companionship was, as one soldier put it, a "soothing connection" with home. Both the 11th Pennsylvania Infantry and the 1st Maryland Infantry (CSA) had singular dogs that followed the men through the most difficult campaigns including Gettysburg. Sallie, the 11th Pennsylvania's unofficial mascot, is remembered in a bronze likeness on the regimental monument at Gettysburg and symbolized there for

its loyalty to the dead of the regiment. The canine that accompanied the 1st Maryland was regrettably killed in action on July 3 at Culp's Hill, after having participated in the charge of the regiment. So struck by the animal's gallantry and loyalty to its human companions, a Union officer ordered the animal be given a proper burial alongside the dead of 1st Maryland.



Cooking over the campfire.  
(Hardtack and Coffee)

*"Hard crackers, hard crackers, come again no more!"*

By far, the food soldiers received has been the source of more stories than any other aspect of army life. The Union soldier received a variety of edibles. The food issue, or *ration*, was usually meant to last three days while on active campaign and was based on the general staples of meat and bread. Meat usually came in the form of salted pork or, on rare occasions, fresh beef. Rations of pork or beef were boiled, broiled or fried over open campfires. Army bread was a flour biscuit called hardtack, re-named "tooth-dullers", "worm castles", and "sheet iron crackers" by the soldiers who ate them. Hardtack could be eaten plain though most men preferred to toast them over a fire, crumble them into soups, or crumble and fry them with their pork and bacon fat in a dish called *skillygalee*.

Other food items included rice, peas, beans, dried fruit, potatoes, molasses, vinegar, and salt. Baked beans were a northern favorite when the time could be taken to prepare them and a cooking pot with a lid could be obtained. Coffee was a most desirable staple and some soldiers considered the issue of coffee and accompanying sugar more important than anything else. Coffee beans were distributed green so it was up to the soldiers to roast and grind them. The task for this most desirable of beverages was worth every second as former soldier John Billings recalled: "What a Godsend it seemed to us at times! How often after being completely jaded by a night march... have I had a wash, if there was water to be had, made and drunk my pint or so of coffee and felt as fresh and invigorated as if just arisen from a night's sound sleep!"

Soldiers often grouped themselves into a "mess" to combine and share rations, often with one soldier selected as cook or split duty between he and another man. But while on active campaign, rations were usually prepared by each man to the individual's taste. It was considered important for the men to cook the meat ration as soon as it was issued, for it could be eaten cold if activity prevented cook fires. A common campaign dinner was salted pork sliced over hardtack with coffee boiled in tin cups that each man carried.

The southern soldier's diet was considerably different from his northern counterpart and usually in much less quantity. The average Confederate subsisted on bacon, cornmeal, molasses, peas, tobacco, vegetables and rice. They also received a coffee substitute which was not as desirable as the real coffee northerners had. Trades of tobacco for coffee were quite common throughout the war when fighting was not underway. Other items for trade or barter included newspapers, sewing needles, buttons, and currency.



(Hardtack and Coffee)

Soldiers loved to sing and there were many tunes popular in both armies. A variety of instruments were available to musically minded soldiers including guitars, banjos, flutes, and harmonicas. More industrious soldiers fashioned string instruments such as fiddles out of wooden cigar boxes. Regimental or brigade bands often played during the evening hours and there were instances of army bands being heard to play favorite tunes for the opposition when the armies were separated by a river or siege line. Some of the more popular tunes for southerners were "Lorena", "Maryland My Maryland", and "The Bonnie Blue Flag". Union soldiers had "The Battle Cry Of Freedom", "Battle Hymn of the Republic", and "Tenting on the Old Campground" as favorites. The men of both sides also enjoyed minstrel tunes such as "My Old Kentucky Home", "The Arkansas Traveler", and "Dixie".

Religion was very important in the soldier's daily routine. Many of the men attended church services on a regular basis and some even carried small testaments with the rest of their baggage. Union and Confederate armies had numerous regimental and brigade chaplains. These loyal officers also acted as assistants in field hospitals comforting the sick and wounded, and writing letters home for those who could not write. Chaplains held field services for their respective units and most accompanied the soldiers as they marched onto the battlefield. Father William Corby, the chaplain of the Irish Brigade, is best remembered for his granting of unconditional absolution to the members of the brigade before they marched into battle in the Wheatfield on July 2nd. Father Corby was immensely popular with the men and in the post-war era became president of Notre Dame University.



(Hardtack and Coffee)

Discipline in the military was very strict. The Provost Marshal of the army was responsible for enforcing military rules, but regimental commanders also had the authority to dole out punishments for minor offenses. Petty offenses such as shirking camp duty or not keeping equipment in good order were usually treated with extra duties such as digging latrines, chopping wood, or standing extra hours on guard duty. Insubordination, thievery, cowardice, or other offenses were more serious and the guilty party was usually subjected to embarrassing punishments such as carrying a log, standing on a barrel, or wearing a placard announcing his crime. "Bucking and gagging" was also a common punishment- the soldier's limbs were bound and he was gagged so he could not speak. In the artillery, the guilty person might be tied to the spare wheel on the back of a caisson. Desertion, spying, treachery, murder, or threats on an officer's life were the most serious offenses to which the perpetrator was condemned to military prison or shot by a firing squad. Crimes committed against civilians were also punishable by the army and felons were executed by hanging before a formation of soldiers.

Sickness and disease were the scourge of both armies and more men died of disease than in battle. Sanitation in the camps was very poor. Germs and the existence of bacteria had not yet been discovered, and medical science was quite primitive by today's standards. Morning sick call was played in camp and ailing soldiers trudged to the surgeon's tent where the "sawbones" examined the sick. Quinine or other stimulants were administered, including an elixir called "Blue Mass". Whiskey was universally given for most ailments as was brandy and other stimulants. Extremely ill soldiers were sent to brigade hospitals where most were further affected by disease. Thousands of men in both armies died without ever firing a shot in battle.

The singular purpose of the soldier was to fight a battle and win. There were a variety of [small arms](#) used during the Civil War. The average infantryman carried a muzzle-loading rifle-musket manufactured in American arsenals or one purchased from foreign countries such as England. The bayonet was an important part of the rifle and its steel presence on the muzzle of the weapon was very imposing. When not in battle, the bayonet was a handy candle holder and useful in grinding coffee beans. The typical rifle-musket weighed eight and one-half pounds and fired a conical shaped bullet called the *Minie Ball*. Bullets were made of very soft lead and caused horrible wounds which were difficult to heal. The artillery was composed of both rifled and smoothbore cannon, each gun served by a crew of fourteen men including the drivers. The role of the artillery was to support the infantry while the infantry role was to either attack or defend, depending on the circumstances. Both branches worked together to coordinate their tactics on the field of battle. Cavalrymen were armed with breech loading carbines, sabers, and pistols. Cavalry was initially used for scouting purposes and to guard supply trains. The role of mounted troops had expanded by the time of Gettysburg, with cavalry divisions acting as skirmishers and fighting mounted and on foot in pitched battles such as Brandy Station, Virginia on June 9, 1863. Other branches of the armies included the signal corps, engineers, medical and hospital corps, as well as supply organizations including the quartermasters.

The end of the war in 1865 brought a welcome peace, especially for the men who served as soldiers. Armies were disbanded and regiments mustered out of service. Former soldiers returned to the farms and stores they had left so long ago, but the memories of their service and old comrades did not disappear quite so rapidly. In the decade following the end of the Civil War, organizations of veterans of the North and South were formed. Northern veterans joined the **Grand Army of the Republic** and Confederate veterans enrolled in the **United Confederate Veterans**. For many years, G.A.R. posts and U.C.V. chapters met over reunion campfires retelling stories and recalling the friends who did not return. Many veterans wrote articles, stories, and [poems](#) for the magazines of both organizations. The G.A.R. and U.C.V. held powerful influence in political circles from 1878 through the turn of the century, but their influence faded as veterans in congress retired and passed out of politics. The last hurrah for both organizations came at Gettysburg in 1913 when 54,000 veterans attended the 1913 Anniversary celebration and Grand Reunion, and both organizations formally joined in a singular purpose of national unification and peace. America's involvement in the Great War (World War I) four years later brought hundreds of aged "Yanks" and "Johnnies" out to march together in military parades for one last time before they quickly faded into the background as the nation's attention focused on her "doughboys" serving in Europe.

Though the Civil War veterans faded away, the armies in which they once marched were forever honored by the parks they helped establish at Shiloh, Antietam, Vicksburg, Chickamauga and Gettysburg.

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Bell Irvin Wiley, The Life of Billy Yank, The Common Soldier of the Union, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1952 & 1978.

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### **National Park Service**

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